

## Immaterial Correspondence

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## Brontë Studies

Published: 01/03/2018

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*  
Koehler, K. (2018). Immaterial Correspondence: Letters, Bodies, and Desire in Charlotte Brontë's Villette. *Brontë Studies*, 43(2), 136-146.

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# **Immaterial Correspondence: Letters, Bodies, and Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette***

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## Immaterial Correspondence: Letters, Bodies, and Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

This article examines how Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) revises the eighteenth-century literary convention of presenting letters as substitutes for, and extensions of, correspondents' bodies. It argues that Lucy Snowe, the novel's narrator and protagonist, strategically suppresses the material nature of correspondence, embracing a model of disembodied epistolary textuality in its place. She does so, the essay suggests, in order to resist her society's oppressive gender roles and sexual hierarchies. Lucy produces her own texts to evade dominant cultural readings of, and scripts for, her female body. She thus successfully negotiates an unusual degree of intellectual and economic independence while also retaining a possibility – albeit compromised – of romantic fulfilment.

Keywords: *Villette*; letters; epistolarity; body; gender

In *Villette* (1853), Charlotte Brontë rewrites a prevalent narrative convention, encoded in eighteenth-century literary culture, of using the letter 'as a metonym for the corporeal body'.<sup>1</sup> The novel features a character/narrator who deliberately represses the somatic aspects and effects of correspondence, staging a gradual disembodiment of epistolary exchange. This article argues that Lucy Snowe, Charlotte Brontë's protagonist, uses the epistolary medium to circumvent prescriptive accounts of sexual difference and hierarchy, embracing what Steven Earnshaw has described as 'an ontology of letters' that foregrounds 'the primacy of writing' as a 'potential bridge between souls'.<sup>2</sup> Letters, I propose, become a crucial instrument in Lucy's endeavour to reconcile her romantic, intellectual, and professional ambitions, as they allow her to erase her body – and its culturally encoded meanings – from the process of communication. Thus, Lucy adopts a strategy paralleled in the correspondence and published writings of Charlotte Brontë, who took advantage of textual disembodiment to negotiate her position, and protect her integrity, as a female author in a male-dominated society and literary market.

It is an enduring convention of epistolary discourse – fictional and actual – to make, as Esther Milne writes, the ‘materiality of the letter [...] stand for the correspondent’s body’.<sup>3</sup> Ruth Perry summarises that ‘[i]n virtually every epistolary novel, letters are kissed, embraced, mooned over, communed with, treasured—as if they were stand-ins for the absent lover’.<sup>4</sup> Janet Altman notes that ‘the letter as a physical entity emanating from, passing between, and touching each of the lovers may function itself as a figure for the lover’.<sup>5</sup> For Linda Kauffman, epistolary discourses are ‘discourses of desire’, continually evoking the letter’s power to ‘sustain the illusion’ of presence.<sup>6</sup> Epistolary texts, in short, habitually bring into play the assumption that letters can serve as ‘the proxies of an absent body’.<sup>7</sup> *Villette* explicitly echoes the convention that construes the letter as placeholder for its writer’s body, especially in Lucy Snowe’s account of the five letters she receives from Dr John (and in Paulina Home’s much later description of letters from the same author). In Charlotte Brontë’s novel, however, the earlier convention collides with a new perspective on the letter. Earnshaw notes that by the end of the novel ‘the ontology of letters, which is one of physical separation, [...] augurs the best relationship possible between a man and a woman’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in the course of the novel, Lucy comes to celebrate rather than deplore epistolary disembodiment, since, in her correspondence with M. Paul, the physical body’s absence from the epistolary exchange appears to liberate a new potential for emotional expression and spiritual connection. As Lucy’s attitude toward correspondence changes, the representation of letters, too, undergoes a transformation. Charlotte Brontë’s novel demonstrates that, as Esther Milne notes, ‘the desire to eclipse the human body’ through mediated – and apparently disembodied – communication also entails the attempt ‘to eclipse the material technology of communication’.<sup>9</sup> The letters that punctuate the plot of Charlotte Brontë’s final completed novel, I suggest, enact the protagonist’s (and author’s) growing resistance against the intimate

association of letters and bodies, so that correspondence comes to be envisaged and depicted in increasingly less material terms as *Villette* moves toward its ambivalent ending.

Like its predecessor *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* has an unconventional heroine. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* does not reward her with a conventional ending. When the story ends and by the time of its narration, Lucy Snowe remains – most likely – single. Against Lucy's own narratorial evasions, though, and against her persistent denial of 'what are called warmer feelings', Charlotte Brontë's language repeatedly highlights her protagonist's capacity for sexual response (V 282).<sup>10</sup> The clearest evidence to this effect exists in the description of the first letter Lucy receives from Graham Bretton/Dr John, her childhood friend and object of a manifestly physical infatuation. But this letter, along with four others by the same author, follows an unusual trajectory: it is hidden, lost, and finally buried by the recipient.<sup>11</sup> Lucy's portrayal of her correspondence with Dr John, then, charts a movement toward a representational and communicational paradigm that privileges disembodiment.

When Lucy recovers from a long illness, triggered by emotional and physical isolation, her doctor promises to write to her. Glimpsing a letter in a servant's hands a week later, Lucy reacts with rapture: 'A letter! The shape of a letter similar to that had haunted my brain in its very core for seven days past. I had dreamed of a letter last night. Strong magnetism drew me to that letter now' (V 265). Although this quotation conveys a profoundly human longing for the interpersonal communication and connection that a letter might be assumed to represent, Dr John's letters figure as primarily material presences in *Villette*. They are never quoted or even paraphrased, and when Lucy receives the first long-anticipated letter, she does not focus on its contents or even its appearance – it is a generic letter, a 'white envelope, with the spot of red wax in the middle' – but on how it *feels* to the touch (V 265). She is amazed to be holding in her 'hand not a slight note, but an envelope, which must, at least, contain a sheet: it felt, not flimsy, but firm, substantial, satisfying' (V

266). The impression of the letter's primarily haptic allure is reinforced by repeated references to the writer's hands: it is directed 'in a clean, clear, equal, decided hand', whereas the 'seal' is 'round, full, deftly dropped by untremulous fingers, stamped with the well-cut impress of initials, "J. G. B."' (V 266). Holding the letter allows Lucy to imagine being touched by Dr John, an idea that produces 'a glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins' (V 266). Emotions are insistently articulated in physiological terms, which leaves little doubt that Lucy's response to the letter is certainly, though perhaps not consciously, of a sexual nature.

'I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy', Lucy declares as she contemplates her epistolary treasure, 'it was the wild savoury mess of the hunter, nourishing and salubrious meat, forest-fed or desert-reared, fresh, healthful, and life-sustaining' (V 266). The language subtly ties the remark about the epistle to Lucy's earlier, frequently-discussed analysis of the Cleopatra painting in Villette's art gallery. Lucy here attributes Cleopatra's imposing physique – the 'commodity of bulk [...] that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh' – to the consumption of 'very much butcher's meat', listed disparagingly as one of many manifestations of physical indulgence and deficient self-control (V 223).<sup>12</sup> Of course, whereas the 'savoury mess of the hunter' must be obtained by physical labour, 'butcher's meat' is a market commodity, readily acquired in exchange for cash. Yet, the product to be consumed remains virtually the same, and is, as Elaine Showalter notes, associated with female sexual irregularity and/or excess.<sup>13</sup> The food imagery on which Lucy draws to convey the letter's effect signals a close affinity between her own appetites and those too freely indulged by the Cleopatra, suggesting that her body's impulses are rather more unruly than she cares to admit.<sup>14</sup> The description consolidates the reader's awareness of Lucy's (unacknowledged) physical desire for Dr John.

The connection between letter and painting is sustained by the similar manner in which fellow-teacher M. Paul monitors and censors Lucy's interactions with both. In the gallery, M. Paul admonishes Lucy for the impudence implied by 'look[ing] at *that* picture', recommending that she study the appropriately desexualised "'La vie d'une femme'" instead (V 225, original emphasis). When he delivers Dr John's letter to Lucy, he voices no overt criticism, but nonetheless successfully induces shame, speculating: 'Ah! it is too good to read at once: you save it, as, when I was a boy, I used to save a peach whose bloom was very ripe?' (V 269). Lucy reacts with embarrassment – once more registered physiologically, by 'a suddenly-rising warmth on my face' – to the sexual language, and defends herself by emphasising the letter's friendly tenor (V 269). However, as M. Paul appears to understand perfectly well, the letter's verbal content is relatively unimportant to its function as an object of erotic fantasy; what matters is the 'imprint' the material shape of the missive has already made, prior to its arrival, on Lucy's 'inward vision' (V 266). Indeed, whether it is a function of Lucy's retrospective narrative technique or an unmediated account of her younger self's behaviour, Brontë's language implies that her narrator/protagonist engages in a self-conscious performance, staging herself as an epistolary romance heroine – a kind of imaginative roleplay that the material object facilitates but that, as Lucy must acknowledge, the epistolary text does not warrant or sustain.

Discussing the sexual undertones in Lucy's description of Dr John's letter in his seminal *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (1987), John Maynard expresses 'doubt that Brontë created a conscious image', stressing 'how quickly she passes this image of gratification into other sexual images she can elaborate fully'.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, no such elaborate transference would have been necessary for Charlotte Brontë in eroticising the image of the letter, and in turning this material document into an emblem for the author's body (or parts thereof). Far from creating an unconscious image, she draws on a well-established convention of

epistolary discourse, and ‘other sexual images’ are used to enhance rather than elucidate the letter’s symbolic significance. But Maynard is right, of course, to reject the simplistic interpretation of the handling and reading of the letter as representations of foreplay and sexual intercourse.<sup>16</sup> Since Lucy’s reaction to the letter remains wholly detached from verbal content and authorial intent, her words signal a powerful autoerotic experience, rooted in the imagination.<sup>17</sup>

Lucy hides the sealed letter. She looks at, touches, and kisses the missive ‘with a mixture of awe and shame and delight’, before, ‘trembling with sweet impatience’, she breaks the seal (V 267, 272). The fact that reading this letter offers a ‘fulness of delight in this taste of fruition’ confirms the power of the inward vision to overrule external reality (V 272).

Retrospectively, Lucy will reflect that

the cordial core of the delight was, a conviction the blithe, genial language generously imparted, that it had been poured out—not merely to content *me*—but to gratify *himself*. A gratification he might never more desire, never more seek—an hypothesis in every point of view approaching the certain; but *that* concerned the future. (V 272-3)

At the moment of reading, however, she refuses to let gratification be compromised by contemplation of painful facts, giving primacy to her fantasies about the letter’s author: ‘This present moment had no pain, no blot, no want; full, pure, perfect, it deeply blessed me’ (V 273). By emphasising the disjuncture between the letter’s verbal content and Lucy’s response, Charlotte Brontë simultaneously adheres to and modifies the familiar convention of representing letters as surrogates for physical presence. The letter both simulates and is preferable to presence, because the joy it offers is more ‘solid’, more reliable, than Dr John’s sporadic, fleeting appearances (V 266). Once the scene of first reading has passed, however, the narrative pushes more insistently against epistolary convention.



Shortly after she has opened the envelope, the letter's mysterious disappearance transforms Lucy into a 'grovelling, groping, monomaniac' (V 274). Tamara Wagner convincingly argues that the emotional scene in the attic dramatises growing cultural misgivings about the letter's capacity to establish intimate, authentic bonds between correspondents.<sup>18</sup> For Wagner, the 'displacement in a seemingly supernatural theft' symbolises the 'letter form's "containment" in nineteenth-century fiction', exemplified most clearly by the virtual disappearance of the epistolary novel from the literary market.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as Wagner notes, Charlotte Brontë's depiction of Dr John's letter to Lucy marks a farewell to an epistolary legacy; after its disappearance and recovery, familiar epistolary tropes undergo a thorough revision. But this narrative transition not only conveys anxieties about the 'breakdown of communication', I propose, it also emerges as a strategy for subverting normative accounts of the gendered body.<sup>20</sup>

Lucy's direct responses to Dr John's letters, in person and in writing, foreshadow a shift enacted more explicitly in her burial of these material objects. Remembering how she justified her grief about his letter's temporary disappearance to Dr John, Lucy remarks: 'I thought, but did not say, that I prized it like the blood in my veins. I only answered that I had so few letters to care for' (V 275). Her answer literally negates the physical, 'the blood in [her] veins', in favour of ostensibly incorporeal emotion. Similarly, in composing her written reply, Lucy initially follows her heart, a symbolic seat of somatic emotion: 'Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors [...] and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart' (V 282). However, since she knows that her response must not bear witness to the letter's private, physical effects, she lets 'Reason [...] leap in' to 'read, sneer, erase, tear up, re-write, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page' (V 282). Finally, even the autoerotic possibilities of the 'triple-enclosed packet' are foreclosed, when the letters are subjected to the routine surveillance of Lucy's employer (V 325). '[L]es Anglais ont des idées

à eux, en amitié, en amour, en tout. Mais au moins il n'est pas besoin de les surveiller', Mme Beck remarks after she has carefully examined Lucy's belongings, all in the name of protecting the reputation of her school and virtue of her students. (V 328).<sup>21</sup> The fact that the cherished letters not only pass Mme Beck's (as well as M. Paul's) inspection, but also lead the school-mistress to conclude that no further inspections will be necessary, amounts to an external invalidation of Lucy's private desires and fantasies.<sup>22</sup> Having treated the letters as metonymic substitutes for Dr John's body, Lucy must confront what she had long intuited: Dr John's perception of her body is simply that of a doctor for his patient.<sup>23</sup> The letters were designed to affect her physically, but they are not the nourishing food she craved. They are a carefully measured medicine, administered to cure the pathological symptoms of isolation. Once Lucy's symptoms have improved, the correspondence ceases. After the collapse of her 'inward vision', Lucy buries the cherished objects, along with their promise of physical pleasure, reflecting that 'people who have undergone bereavement always jealously gather together and lock away mementos' (V 326). Following the account of the burial, Lucy's narrative abandons the convention of conceptualising personal letters as substitutes for the writer's physical presence. Writing about the first real – and reciprocal – love letters of her life, Lucy will evoke texts rather than objects, emblems of a disembodied passion, a spiritual connection, rather than 'proxies of an absent body'.<sup>24</sup>

In an apparent paradox, the burial of Dr John's letters leaves Lucy 'strong with reinforced strength' (V 329). In fact, it marks the beginning of a steady journey towards intellectual and professional independence. Significantly, as she juxtaposes her protagonist's trajectory with the more typical experiences of other female characters in the novel, Charlotte Brontë emphasises those women's enduring affiliation with the kind of correspondence that Lucy has symbolically renounced. For Ginevra Fanshawe, letters are directly linked to the pursuit of physical gratification, as she uses them for indiscreet flirtation and to arrange trysts

with suitors (V 122-4; 126). Paulina, meanwhile, receives those letters from Dr John/Graham Bretton about which Lucy had only been able to fantasise. 'I actually never received a letter from a gentleman before', Polly tells Lucy, before describing the effect of Bretton's first missive (V 414). 'It lay in my lap during breakfast, looking up at me with an inexplicable meaning, making me feel myself a thing double-existent—a child to that dear papa, but no more a child to myself', she explains, inadvertently describing her sexual awakening (V 414). The following speech is a fainter, more measured, echo of Lucy's earlier words about the doctor's epistles. Like Lucy, Polly consumes her letter privately, 'having secured myself by turning the key in the door' (V 414). She, too, is fascinated and physically affected by the 'outside of my treasure', with its capacity to conjure up the embodied author's appealing image: 'Graham's hand is like himself', she rhapsodises, 'and so is his seal—all clear, firm, and rounded—[...] a clean, mellow, pleasant manuscript, that soothes you as you read. It is like his face—just like the chiselling of his features' (V 414-5). Polly unambiguously identifies the letter object with its writer's masculine beauty.<sup>25</sup> Yet, unlike in Lucy's case, the letter's words have an even stronger physical effect than its appealing haptic and visual qualities: 'Ere I read, and while I read, my heart did more than throb—it trembled fast—every quiver seemed like the pant of an animal athirst, laid down at a well and drinking' (V 415). Polly's exhilaration, and her feeling of physical satisfaction – 'the well proved quite full', she explains, 'it rose up munificently of its own impulse' – is not the result of a private fantasy, but the reaction to a written declaration of love (V 415).

For Ginevra and Paulina, letters not only simulate physical presence, they are precursors to sexual consummation. In both cases, romantic correspondence results in marriage and motherhood, echoing the fictional model propounded by Samuel Richardson's paradigmatic epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740).<sup>26</sup> Thus, letters precipitate these women's espousal of the most conventional – or, in keeping with the period's sexual ideology, only

natural – roles available to women. Of course, these roles were routinely cited as arguments against women's demands for political rights, economic independence, and access to education, arguments which gained strength from scientific theories that rooted mental processes in physiology.<sup>27</sup> As Sally Shuttleworth summarises, '[w]oman's role, according to Victorian medical opinion, was entirely bounded by her reproductive functions'.<sup>28</sup> In the name of protecting their fragile reproductive system, nineteenth-century women were exhorted to avoid mental and physical exertions (other than those required by reproductive work) at all costs. Alternatively, they were reminded that, due to the demands of their complex 'uterine economy', their work – whether of an intellectual, creative, or manual nature – would necessarily fall short of male standards.<sup>29</sup> Within this framework, the only permitted outlets for female sexuality imposed severe restrictions upon women's intellectual pursuits and their right to self-determination. As a result, Lucy is deeply ambivalent about physical desire: she cannot relinquish it without regret, but knows that by forsaking it, she might gain access to intellectual and professional opportunities that would otherwise remain closed.<sup>30</sup> Brenda Silver highlights the significance of Lucy's concluding remarks on 'the lives of the two more familiar fictional women after their marriages', which reveal that 'Ginevra [...] fails to develop at all; and Polly [...] however blessed in the resolution of her tale, bears a distinct resemblance to a pampered and adoring spaniel'.<sup>31</sup> Refusing to be thus defined and held back by her reproductive functions, and unwilling to return to the state of a 'groveling, groping, monomaniac' (V 274) for love, Lucy abandons the narrative convention that envisages romantic correspondence as a substitute for physical intimacy and – in stories with 'happy' endings – a precursor to marital sexuality. Instead, she imagines a new epistolary paradigm that promises to remove the body from the process of communication altogether.

Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook writes that in the early eighteenth century, the letter became 'intimately identified with the body, especially a female body, and the somatic terrain

of the emotions, as well as with the thematic material of love, marriage, and the family'.<sup>32</sup> As *Villette* moves toward its close, this intimate association is unravelled. In M. Paul and Lucy Snowe's letters, the correspondents' bodies are conspicuously absent.<sup>33</sup> Their letters conjure up an alternative reality, a reality in which biologically informed constructions of gender identity and sexual hierarchy lose their coercive power. Thus, although the novel 'dramatize[s] an even closer integration of body and mind than physiology envisaged', Charlotte Brontë's narrative resists the view that women – and, indeed, men – are inescapably at the mercy of their bodies.<sup>34</sup> Not wholly voluntarily but no less decisively, Lucy represses her body and its desires. That the narrative she shares can, nonetheless, feature an account of romantic fulfilment is possible because of Charlotte Brontë's imaginative reconfiguration of correspondence. From this new perspective on fictional letters, we can discern the most compelling evidence for John Kucich's provocative claim that in Charlotte Brontë's novels repression 'heightens and vitalizes emotional autonomy, rather than threatening or suppressing it'.<sup>35</sup> What might look like repression becomes – in Charlotte Brontë's reworking of the epistolary tradition – enabling and liberating, facilitating new forms of emotional expression and interpersonal intimacy.

Lucy can only agree to a romantic relationship with M. Paul when their material circumstances change in such a way as to alleviate her anxieties about the repercussions of physical desire. More precisely, she cannot fully welcome her 'despotic' colleague's romantic advances until it turns out that a business transaction will necessitate his removal to the other end of the world (V 226).<sup>36</sup> Letters are the ideal space for this pair's love-making, because rather than in spite of the fact that they are the products of physical distance. The letters that Lucy receives from M. Paul are not 'proxies of an absent body', nor are they simply, as Rachel Jackson proposes, spectral remnants of a perpetually deferred desire.<sup>37</sup>

Instead, for a short period, they offer something Lucy has come to desire more than physical gratification. ‘By every vessel he wrote’, Lucy writes,

he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plenitude. He wrote because he liked to write; he did not abridge, because he cared not to abridge. He sat down, he took pen and paper, because he loved Lucy and had much to say to her; because he was faithful and thoughtful, because he was tender and true. There was no sham and no cheat, and no hollow unreal in him. Apology never dropped her slippery oil on his lips—never proffered, by his pen, her coward feints and paltry nullities: he would give neither a stone, nor an excuse—neither a scorpion, nor a disappointment; his letters were real food that nourished, living water that refreshed.<sup>38</sup> (V 544)

Her accounts of *these* letters foreground what they ‘had to say to her’ rather than how they look and feel; they figure as immaterial texts rather than as material objects that can be lost, stolen, or buried away. M. Paul’s letters can ‘nourish’ and ‘sustain’ Lucy because they facilitate a disembodied intimacy. They provide a space in which the lovers can openly acknowledge and express their mutual passion, but where the menace inherent in physical desire – the threat to female autonomy – remains safely contained. Lucy will remember the three years of romantic epistolary exchange as ‘the three happiest years of my life’ (V 543). M. Paul’s likely premature death in a storm at sea – or rather, Lucy’s refusal to confirm whether or not M. Paul lives or dies – eliminates the possibility to discover whether this happiness could have been perpetuated beyond the disembodiment of epistolary correspondence.

Ivan Kreilkamp argues that ‘Lucy does not want to be a participant in an exchange of language that produces physical intimacy’, and that

*Villette* becomes more intelligible, its perversities at least governed by a recognizable logic, once we recognize in it something like a *desire* for a failure of vocal intimacy, for

conversations broken off, for language experienced not as a person's vocal expression but as material writing.<sup>39</sup>

While I wholly concur with the reading that Lucy desires an experience of language detached from physical and vocal intimacy, I would argue that her ideal is not a material writing but a writing that wholly disavows its own materiality.<sup>40</sup> Hence, while Kreilkamp suggests that in M. Paul's final letters we can discern 'a kind of writing as voice that seeks to make up and substitute for M. Paul's physical absence', I propose that the appeal of these letters resides precisely in the fact that they do not seek to create the illusion of physical presence.<sup>41</sup> In Lucy's narrative, physical absence is not configured as something less than presence, as something for which letters must somehow compensate, but as something more: a space that liberates expression and connection.

Lucy's success in negotiating her culture's narrow conceptions of womanhood is, from the beginning, entwined with loss: she can succeed in her 'labour for independence' only by sacrificing physical desire (V 400). Far from being debilitating, however, this loss remains personally, intellectually, and even romantically enabling throughout. This is the case because of the alternative ways of conceptualising the self and the relationship between self and other that grow out of the disembodiment of written language.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Lucy not only achieves personal, professional, and financial independence as the owner of her own school, she also eventually claims the right to become the author and narrator of her own story. This story not only challenges the notion that 'a "woman of intellect"' is 'a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation' (V 364), it also emerges as a guide for contemporary 'women of intellect', suggesting strategies of resistance against the limitations imposed by culturally dominant accounts of sexual difference and hierarchy.

The conclusion of *Villette* illustrates that, in Milne's words,

The lack of physical presence is not always considered an impediment to communication. For many correspondents, ‘absence’ is creative; it opens a discursive space in which desires and subjectivities that might not otherwise be articulated can be explored.<sup>43</sup>

For Charlotte Brontë, a woman writer who constantly worked to defy the limitations that her society imposed on women’s writing, the creative potential of absence, or rather of textual disembodiment, was central both within and beyond her fictional works. In a letter to Hartley Coleridge, dated 10 December 1840, she remarked:

I am pleased that you cannot quite decide whether I belong to the soft or the hard sex—and though at first I had no intention of being enigmatical on the subject—yet as I accidentally omitted to give the clue at first, I will venture purposely to withhold it now—as to my handwriting, or the ladylike tricks you mention in my style and imagery—you must not draw any conclusions from those—Several young gentlemen curl their hair and wear corsets—Richardson and Rousseau—often write exactly like old women—and Bulwer and Cooper and Dickens and Warren like boarding-school misses.<sup>44</sup>

Charlotte Brontë writes to thank Coleridge for his generous feedback on what she goes on to describe as ‘the semi-demi novelette of an anonymous scribe who had not even the manners to tell you whether he was a man or a woman’.<sup>45</sup> Despite her statements to the contrary, the omission of her gender in the initial letter may well have been deliberate. Just under four years earlier, having solicited literary advice from the poet laureate Robert Southey, Brontë infamously received a response that not only acknowledged her talent, but also stated categorically that ‘[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be’.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps she conjectured that to sign with the pseudonymous initials ‘CT’ in the letter to Hartley Coleridge would ensure a more neutral hearing for her manuscript. But while we can only speculate about the motive for Charlotte Brontë’s anonymity, the letter unmistakably reveals her delight in Coleridge’s inability to determine her gender identity based on the manuscripts she has sent him. More than that, the letter expresses an emphatic denial of the



very idea that texts are gendered products. Charlotte Brontë concedes that texts may appear feminine or masculine in tone, content, and shape, yet she firmly insists that such textual characteristics bear no meaningful relation to the writer's biological sex. Thus, years before Charlotte Brontë would venture to publish her work under the androgynous pseudonym of Currer Bell, her personal correspondence already conceptualised textuality as a medium that destabilises how and what sexual difference signifies, downplaying the material meanings of written texts in order to enhance freedom of expression. Charlotte Brontë disavows the importance of material signifiers to have, in her words, 'my own way in the matter of writing'.<sup>47</sup> More than a decade later, her final novel *Villette* would offer her most sustained fictional exploration of the liberating potential of textual disembodiment. In *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë revises epistolary conventions to reveal a new perspective on correspondence, suggesting that the act of writing a letter might render possible an escape from, or even the transcendence of, the constraints of the physical body.

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<sup>1</sup> Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Earnshaw, 'Charlotte Brontë's Fictional Epistles', *Brontë Studies*, 40.3 (2015): 201-214 (p. 201)

<sup>3</sup> Milne, *Technologies of Presence*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. by Kevin Repp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Earnshaw, 'Fictional Epistles', p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Milne, *Technologies of Presence*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Helen Cooper (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 282; hereafter *V*. Further references to the novel will be given in in-text parentheses.

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between letters, sexual desire, and sexual repression has been central to critical discussions of *Villette*, though emphasis tends to lie on the symbolic significance of the letters' burial. See, for instance, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000); Jin-Ok Kim, *Charlotte Brontë and Female Desire* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed, illuminating discussion of the Cleopatra painting, see Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 131–55.

<sup>13</sup> See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 192.

<sup>14</sup> On the imagery of food, and the themes of hunger and appetite, in the novel, see Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100-15.

- <sup>15</sup> John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 173.
- <sup>16</sup> Maynard, p. 153. Maynard specifically takes issue with the discussion of the scene in Russell M. Goldfarb, *Sexual Repression and Victorian Literature* (Lewisburg, PA: Buckness University Press, 1970), p. 150.
- <sup>17</sup> On the mutual resonances between contemporary debates about female auto-eroticism and Brontë's novel, see Emma L.E. Rees, 'Narrating the Victorian Vagina: Charlotte Brontë and the Masturbating Woman', in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2011), pp. 119–34.
- <sup>18</sup> see Tamara S Wagner, 'Containing Emotional Distress: The Elusive Letter Novel in *Villette*', *Brontë Studies*, 36.2 (2011), 131–40 (p. 138). Wagner builds on Mary Favret's account of the epistolary novel's demise in the early nineteenth century in *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 206, 213. For a further, illuminating discussion of the letter's changing trajectory in nineteenth-century fiction, see Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- <sup>19</sup> Wagner, 'Containing Emotional Distress', p. 135.
- <sup>20</sup> Wagner, 'Containing Emotional Distress', p. 133.
- <sup>21</sup> "The English have their own notions, in friendship, in love, in everything. But at least there's no need to keep watch over them." My translation.
- <sup>22</sup> See Janet Gezari, *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 160.
- <sup>23</sup> See Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 154. As Shuttleworth explains, Lucy develops strategies for resisting Dr John's medical gaze, and her defiance 'seems to stem less from the actual content of his medical verdicts than from his reduction of her to a bundle of symptoms'.
- <sup>24</sup> see Siegert, p. 16.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jessica Brent, 'Haunting Pictures, Missing Letters: Visual Displacement and Narrative Elision in *Villette*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 37.1/2, 86–111 (pp. 100–103).
- <sup>26</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. by Margaret A. Doody (London: Penguin, 2003).
- <sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- <sup>28</sup> Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 82.
- <sup>29</sup> Shuttleworth, "'Female Circulation: Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era'", in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 47–68 (p. 64).
- <sup>30</sup> see Rachel Jackson, 'Empty Letters and the Ghost of Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *Brontë Studies*, 35 (2010), 95–106 (p. 96).
- <sup>31</sup> Brenda R. Silver, 'The Reflecting Reader in *Villette*', in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 90–111 (p. 110).
- <sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> See Earnshaw, p. 212.
- <sup>34</sup> Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 239.
- <sup>35</sup> John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 2–3.
- <sup>36</sup> See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 55. It is this knowledge of certain separation, too, that enables Lucy to accept M. Paul's gift of a school, which, only under these conditions, guarantees her independence.
- <sup>37</sup> Siegert, *Relays*, p. 16; Jackson, 'Empty Letters', p. 96.
- <sup>38</sup> For a sensitive reading of these later letters, see Beth Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 86–87.
- <sup>39</sup> Ivan Kreilkamp, 'Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 32.3 (1999), 331–54.
- <sup>40</sup> See Earnshaw, p. 212.
- <sup>41</sup> Kreilkamp, 'Unuttered', pp. 340, 342, 351.
- <sup>42</sup> Pauline Nestor highlights the significance of the 1840 introduction of the penny post for early- to mid-Victorian letter writers and representations of letter writing. Nestor argues that 'there is much to suggest that [the] new found access to affordable communication had a particular relevance for women,' partly because they 'were more dependent on the letter's capacity to bridge distance, given the constraints on feminine mobility' and partly because correspondence generated 'new spaces for the development of an interiorised, private self'. See

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Nestor, 'New Opportunities for Self-Reflection and Self-Fashioning: Women, Letters and the Novel in Mid-Victorian England', *Literature and History*, 19.2 (2010), 18–35 (pp. 20–24)

<<http://manchester.metapress.com/index/P262U46827525M67.pdf>> [accessed 6 June 2014]. For a comprehensive account of the social and cultural impact of Victorian postal reform, see Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Milne, *Technologies of Presence*, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Brontë, *Selected Letters*, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë, 12 March 1837, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a selection of letters by family and friends*, ed. Margaret Smith, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 166–7

<sup>47</sup> Brontë, *Selected Letters*, p. 144. According to Margaret Smith, the cited letter, dated 21 September 1849, is almost certainly addressed to Charlotte's publisher William Smith Williams.